

**Excerpts from The Life of St. Gregentius, archbishop of the Himyarites  
(St. Gregory of Taphar) About the 'Tribe of Ishmael' (10th c.)**



## IX

So when the blessed Gregentios was in Alexandria in the days of Ioustinos, emperor of the Romans, and Elesboam, king of Ethiopia, and Dounaas, king of the Homerites, and Proterios, pope of Alexandria, the king of the Homerites Dounaas who, regarding his faith, was a Jew, took by treachery Negra, the town that lies in the south. 103 And this vainglorious man invited all inhabitants of the town to deny our Lord Jesus Christ and to embrace the veneration according to the law. When they all spoke up against his edict, the most impious king became furious, and giving order to light a very strong fire for a sufficient time, he turned that innumerable multitude of people there to ashes and destroyed them; some of them he also choked by strangling, and the eminent ones among them he executed by the sword. Among them he also had the venerable head of their most worthy ruler cut off by the sword, a greyhaired man called Arethas, after a considerable number of discussions he had with him. And the end of the story: Having scattered everything there like dust, this cursed one returned to his palace, writing also to the powers around him, and not only to these, but also to the king of the Persians, to remove completely the race of the Christians from his kingdom, "just in the way", he said, "in which I also have done it."

When Ioustinos, the emperor of the Romans, learned about this, he wrote with immense emphasis to Elesboam, the most holy king of Ethiopia, to raise the armies of his kingdom, to make war against the unlawful Hebrew and to avenge the worthy and innocent blood of the righteous ones that had suffered so bravely for the blameless faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the all-praiseworthy king did this: He gathered all his army, began a war against him by land and sea and completely destroyed his armies, I say of the unlawful one, and also arrested the unlawful Hebrew himself together with his relatives and executed them by the sword. He took also his kingdom and all castles unto his kingdom. He also took Tephra by storm, the residential town of the Homerites, entered it and plundered all the property of his kingdom, and killed a great number of people there to terrify them, so that the remaining ones were afraid and agreed with him to receive holy baptism, Jews and other foreign nations.

And since there was no bishop there nor a priest or deacon, but also nobody from the clergy of the most holy church (for the enemy of the holy and consubstantial Trinity had wiped out nearly all of them, so that not even their remembrance could be found in all his kingdom, for he even removed the holy remains of those of them that had died before and already rested in their worthy shrines, and turned them to ashes by fire as well), therefore the most holy King Elesboam wrote from the country of the Homerites to Proterios, the pope of Alexandria, telling him all word for word, and how the Lord God had prepared his way. And thereafter he also wrote to him to choose from all his patriarchate a wise, learned, intelligent and understanding man who was educated thoroughly in the Old and New Testament, and to appoint him as bishop and to send him to him with all his requirements and with ecclesiastical company.

So when the letters arrived at the pope of Alexandria, the patriarch searched some days for someone that could be sent out to the king, where he would find such a worthy man, powerful in deed and word and full of the Holy Ghost, who was a chosen one of the Lord and seemed pleasant to the Master. And when some people brought one candidate to the pope and others a different one, proposing them as being suitable and suggesting that he should anoint them and send them out, his spirit did not rest on a single one of them, so that he would have been able to appoint him and send him out. So he gave order that a fasting should be held and a laudation which lasted all night; and when this had been accomplished, on the following day, when he was sleeping on his bed, the most holy apostle Mark appeared to him in a dream and said: "Brother Proterios, why are you grieved so much, and why do you lie so sad and do not know what to do about the man you are searching for? Rise quickly and ask for the deacon Gregentios, a foreigner who has arrived in this town some time ago. He is entertained at ta Boukolou in the house of a man called Leontios; take him, do the necessary things with him, anoint him and send him out. For the Lord our God has raised him from afar because of this our need and made him come to this town by various stations."<sup>104</sup>

When the pope rose in the morning and let search for him quickly, those he had sent out found the blessed Gregentios and made him known to the patriarch. He ordered to bring him before him with the greatest honour. And when this happened, the archbishop rose and received him gladly. The blessed Gregentios threw himself before the feet of the pope and said to him: "Master, bless your unworthy servant." The pope raised him, embraced him and said: "Welcome, you servant of God Gregentios, the worthy body of the holy church of God." And he took his right hand, they walked together and sat down privately, and it was difficult for the pope to convince the blessed one to do this. So when they had sat down, the patriarch began to ask the blessed one, where he came from and from which regions, and how "have you reached this city that lies in the south", he said. The blessed one told him all word for word, where he came from, through which places he had passed and how he had arrived at that city. And when the patriarch heard this, he wondered greatly.

After they had spoken about these things, the patriarch said to the righteous one: "Do you know, my child, for what reason we have sent for you? For you know yourself that we knew neither your virtue, nor also who you are, nor that you have arrived in this city. But the Lord our God has revealed to us all about you." And with this word he laid the whole truth open to him, showing him also the letters that had been sent to him by the King Elesboam. "And for the Lord's sake," he said, "o child, yield to this spiritual duty and give yourself as a present to us and submit your neck to the worthy and honest yoke of the Lord, go there anointed by the Holy Ghost as a shepherd and herdsman of the reasonable sheep of Christ, and you will tend his flock as a good father, and will fight in the Lord with all your heart to bring back those that have gone astray, to gather those that were scattered and to enlighten those that were darkened, so that you as a good

servant, having multiplied your talent, will hear the Lord saying: Well done, my good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things. Yes, o child, for the sake of the Lord, do not set yourself above the things I have told you, but obey as a subject in all good work and show here also the readiness of your divine virtue, and that you accept your obedience and submission to the Lord willingly."

Now when the archbishop had spoken these and many other things to him for his consolation, the blessed Gregentios in his mind thought of all those that had announced to him before, when he had gone from one town of the Lord to another, about this matter of which the archbishop had told him, and especially he remembered those secret words of that holy old man who had come to him in the gorge of the mountain, walking in the air with gentle feet, whereby God showed that those who love the Lord and keep his commandments are taken away in clouds, and that the saints come to meet the Lord in the air on the last day according to the voice of the great herald Paul. Now he remembered the God-inspired words of this holy old man, how he had said to him that "you will go from Rome to Augustopolis and from there", he said, "you will proceed to Alexandria, and the Pope Proterios will send you out to Ethiopia, and from there you will reach the country of the Homerites which lies in the south" and also the other remaining things, and he sat down silently, moistening the fold of his robe with tears.

When the archbishop exhorted him still more and asked him not to refuse his request nor to reject it, and also inquired for the reason of his streaming tears, the blessed one told him with toil and pain in detail about that holy old man and how, he said, "he has revealed all this foretelling it to me." For when he thought in his mind about the fulfilment of his predictions, being struck by fear he was seized by his tears saying: "And I will come, though unwillingly; and the will of the Lord be done, and you are my master, do with me what has been advised to you by the Lord." When all these things had been said between them and the worthy Gregentios had agreed, the patriarch rejoiced greatly and hurried immediately without hesitation to fulfil quickly what the king of the Ethiopians had announced to him, for those that had been sent by him also urged him much. So he went down into the church, and when all the usual things had been accomplished which are done at ordinations, he appointed him as a priest and thereafter as a bishop.

And an extraordinary wonder happened when he performed the liturgy over him: For during the whole divine liturgy a sweetly smelling smoke did not cease to come forth from his garments, as if eagle-wood or anointments or invaluable composed incenses were being burnt. All those that were in the church were filled with that heavenly sweet odour and were amazed in a strange way, for that divine smell exceeded all understanding by its unutterable sweetness. And his face changed and became white as snow until the laudation of the Trishagion, and he appeared like a burning and shining fire, brightened by the grace of the all-Holy Ghost, so that because of this wonder the crowds streamed together like a river around the chancel screens of the divine sanctuary, and everyone of them tried to get at least a glimpse of his sweetest

appearance. The archbishop was also astonished about this together with his worthy clergy, and they wondered greatly and praised God who is glorified in his saints.

Secretly he also called those that had been sent out by the king, to see with their own eyes the incredible portent of the Lord that had befallen the bishop who had been appointed for them, so that later they should not say, that "he has appointed and given us an archpriest from the many ones and the first they met"; but they would rather report to the king which wonders happened to him when he was anointed. And when they approached and saw the miracle, they glorified God.

When these things had been accomplished and happened in this way to the blessed Gregentios, and when the divine liturgy had been accomplished and the remaining usual things, the patriarch gave him everything from himself, and splendidly prepared a festivity for him and what is usually eaten at such occasions. They rejoiced and exulted on that day, and hearing about the blessed one all Alexandria offered praise to God. However, when the ordination of the righteous one had come to an end, the Pope Proterios prepared to send those that had come from the king back to him thereafter together with the blessed one, and when they were all ready, the pope gave the holy one according to his need, and also to those that wanted to depart with him, and embracing them he dismissed them in peace.

They found a favourable passage and reached Ethiopia within few days. 105 And having rested a little in Amlem, the residential town of the Ethiopians, and having taken some necessary things by order of the king, thereafter they embarked on a ship; and sailing a considerable number of days they reached the end of the sea of Saba and from there crossed to the cave of Medekion, and reached Tephars, the residential town of the Homerites. They did not find the king in the city of Tephars, but he was in the town where the unlawful Dounaas had killed the holy martyrs. He destroyed the Jewish sanctuaries of the surrounding towns and the idol temples of the remaining nations, and built churches in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the town of Negra he also built a very beautiful church in the name of the holy and life-giving Resurrection at a place called Nephoth. He also constructed another church in the name of the most holy Mother of God at ta Tademeros; and he built another one in the name of the holy martyrs and the glorious Arethas close to his house, at a place which had been a most wonderful garden before. Similarly he constructed the great church in Tephars in the name of the holy Trinity close to the palace, where the bloodthirsty king of the Hebrews had dwelt, and another one in the middle of Dana, a main street which was so called, in the name of our holy Lady and Mother of God Maria, and another one at the western gate of the city in the name of the holy Apostles. And he constructed three churches in the town of Akana, one of the Saviour in the name of his Ascension, one of the prophet John, the Baptist and Precursor, and another church in the name of the holy apostle Thomas. In the town of Atarph, in Legmia, Azaki and Iouze and in the other towns he scattered his armies, and pressing the local people into service he erected holy churches everywhere, making his grand men the overseers of these works.

When he was still in Negra, as it has been said (for he was celebrating a feast, at which occasion he also appointed the son of the holy Arethas as ruler), the good news came to him that "they have arrived," they said, "master, whom your majesty has sent out to Alexandria because of a bishop, and they bring someone with them whom they have received as our bishop." When the king heard this, he was filled with great cheer, rose and went down to meet the bishop. For the most pious and Christ-loving king was extremely humble, more than any other among those that had reigned before him in Ethiopia. Now when the king came into the courtyard of the palace, those that had arrived together with the blessed one showed him to him from afar.

When they had approached each other, the most blessed bishop went to the pious king, embraced him and prayed for him. In turn the king himself embraced the saint in the same way as well, took his right hand, and they went up to the place where he dwelt. When the king had sat down on his throne and the blessed one very close to him, those that had arrived gave the letters of the Pope Proterios to the king, and also his gifts which he had sent him. And when he had learned from his letters about the blessed one, he rejoiced even more, and addressed the righteous one with fear, being filled with infinite gladness. For he had understood that he had taken and sent him, having him ordained because of a vision of God, and which wonders God had shown to him when he was appointed. So he glorified the Highest for all this, took the bishop and went away to inaugurate the churches he had built for the Lord. Now when first the noble churches in the town of Negra had been consecrated by the most holy bishop Gregentios, the king took him, went to the town of Akana and inaugurated the churches there as well; and the divine Gregentios appointed a priest for every church, when he passed through and consecrated it, and installed him in the divine sanctuary. Then they came to Atephar and Legmia, consecrated the divine shrines and were in good cheer. And thereafter they went through all the surrounding towns, and having inaugurated and consecrated the holy precincts, they came to Tephar, the residential town of the Homerites, and having rested some days, they also established the adorable houses there and lived in joy and gladness, rejoicing and celebrating feasts.

Since the most holy King Elesboam hastened to return to his own kingdom (for he had spent a considerable time in the country of the Homerites, that is, as some say, about thirty-six months since he had begun his war there), he invited the blessed Gregentios and all his grand men and satraps. They assembled with the most pious king and the most holy archpriest presiding, and the king said to the senate: "Whom do you think we should leave behind here, having anointed him as king?" When they said that "there is nobody among us of greater wisdom than your majesty, o master; therefore, whom the Lord God will throw into your heart, give order that this man be appointed." And the most pious king looked upon the holy Gregentios and said: "This is your work, o our worthy master and shepherd; behold, all rulers, grand men and satraps stand before your face, young and old. Now invoke our Lord Jesus Christ and take for yourself as king, out of all those whom the Lord God will lead to your heart. For we all also have to depart from here.

The one you will choose for yourself shall stay here with you, be this man bad or good. Now choose from all these the one you desire."

And the archbishop said: "You have made a good proposal, o Christ-loving master; for in the same way as your heart is like that of a king in the hand of God, similarly also this word has been offered by the Lord. For it is always good at every time and place and thing, first to ask our father in heaven, and then to do as he has approved."

Having said this, the blessed one rose immediately and went away a little from them, bowed his knee and said spreading out his arms to the Lord: "You great power, you fear-inspiring name, you ineffable wisdom and understanding of God, you holy one, you powerful ruler, you eye that looks upon the poor, you holy eye which examines the righteous and the faithless: Let your unsleeping eyes see, who among these people, that have gathered before your face, is capable of the task. And give through him a sign for good, so that your all-holy name may be glorified for this as well."

And when he prayed thus, the power of the Lord raised the worthy one up into the air, carried him and put him before the righteous one and the King Elesboam. And when all the people saw this incredible wonder, they were astonished and in ecstasy cried out the "Kyrie eleison". And the most worthy bishop answered and said to the king: "Honour this man whom the Lord has shown you, you most pious one, with your right hand and give him to me, and we will be here together, as the Lord will guide us aright and your Christ-loving gentleness will support us." On the spot, without hesitation, the king brought a royal robe, dressed him, and after the archbishop had spoken a prayer over him, he put a royal crown on his head. They went into the great church, which had been built in the name of the holy Trinity, and when the holy liturgy had been performed, the new king also took part in the procession and the divine entrance into the divine sanctuary together with the most pious King Elesboam.

After the completion the army exclaimed: "To the most holy King Elesboam of Ethiopia, many good years!" And they said this seven times. And thereafter they exclaimed: "To the Christ-loving King Abraam of the Homerites, many efficient and pious and good years!" And they said this as to a new king ten times. And again they exclaimed saying: "To Elesboam and Abraam, our most pious and Christloving kings, many years. To our most holy archbishop and shepherd Gregentios, many peaceful, healthy and complete, holy and good years!" When the army had exclaimed this, the kings returned into the palace and went to a meal, offering rich presents to the army.

So the most righteous Elesboam, after having presented the Christ-loving Abraam as king of the Homerites, stayed in that country thirty-three days. And having arranged everything there well, and having exhorted the new King Abraam much to govern the kingdom piously and also

to obey always and in all things to the most holy father Gregentios, he selected fifteen thousand men from the army and left them behind for them as their guard.

And he himself returned to Ethiopia, and having arrived there, the most pious one, owing an offer of thanks to the good God, did not only present him only with gold or silver, precious stones or pearls, but offered himself completely as a pure sacrifice and rational veneration to the creator, with God not allowing another greater one from his subjects.<sup>106</sup> For he handed over his kingdom to his own son Atherphotham,<sup>107</sup> took himself one tunic of hair and went up to the mountain Ophra which nearly competes with the clouds, as the saying goes, and lies in the desert; there he shut himself up completely in a dark cell in the earth, blocked up the entry of the cave and spent all the days of his angel-like life without seeing anybody or speaking to anybody, and so went to the Lord. And he received food through a small hole from the monks that lived there, which was put there by someone that came up from the monastery at the foot of the mountain and returned thereafter.

It is also told<sup>108</sup> that there was a young brother in that monastery, and when he was sent out into the world on some duty, he fornicated and devoted himself to drinking wine without scruple, and so returned to the monastery. Now one day he went according to his custom to the monastery through the desert, and when he came to some gorge, a great serpent emerged from the grove with immense speed and pursued him wanting to kill him. He fled here and ran away there, but could not escape it. When he was in great difficulty and did not know what to do (for it held him already in order to devour him), the righteous King Elesboam came into his mind, and he turned around and said to the serpent: "By the prayer of the most holy and righteous King Elesboam, desist from me and do not pursue me anymore." The serpent was ashamed by the word by which the brother had sworn before him, stood still and, answering with a human voice, it said to him: "How should I spare you, since an angel of the Lord has told me from heaven to devour you because of your impurity and fornication, that although you had promised to serve the Lord, you went around polluting your body and made God's Holy Ghost angry?" When he still stood there and listened and was astonished that it had talked to him like a man, and trembled and enjured him according to his previous word to spare him, the serpent answered and said to him: "Swear to me that you will give into this dirty desire anymore, by which the first fall happened to the world, and I will release you." The brother swore saying: "By the one that dwells in heaven and the prayer of the worthy and holy King Elesboam, I will not make my Lord angry, whom I have badly made angry until now by fornication and profligacy." And it happened that when he said this word to the serpent, fire fell down from heaven before the brother and devoured the serpent. And he was filled with fear and trembling, and quivering he returned to his monastery and did not continue to sin before God. And so much about this.

After the most pious King Elesboam had left, the most blessed Gregentios gathered all priests of all churches, chose the most learned ones of them and appointed them as bishops in the towns,



and also gave order, together with the most worthy King Abraam that all those under his power should either leave their vain faith and be baptised or, if they persisted, should be subject to capital punishment. Therefore, when this order went out, one could see them all hasten with their wives and children to the divine bath of rebirth, and come to Christ by it. For all bishops baptised all those that came to them in every town with pure intentions, and the people were enlightened, and much damage was done to the devil.

## X

When these were enlightened in this way and attached themselves to the knowledge of truth, the Jews of all towns under that reign arose, came together and said: "What shall we do? For if we do not let ourselves be baptised, following the decree of the new king, his satraps will kill us according to the order they received from him."<sup>109</sup> And as they were bewildered by this, some of them said: "Let us do what the king wants so that we do not die before the time, and thereafter keep our faith again." Others said: "But if we should do this, will God not see that we trespass against his law, and since he is a God of revenge, will exact his retribution, and we will perish even worse?" And others said: "As it seems, God has just no need of us anymore, because he has given our pious king Dounaas into the hands of Elesboam, to be killed together with his army. Come on now and if you want, let us take our belongings secretly, every single one, and leave these regions, so that we may not lose our souls together with our bodies." And again others said: "If we want to go away in the way you have said and the Christians notice this, you know at all events what they will do to us."

And one of them called Herban, a very learned and clever teacher of the law who knew the Old Testament very well and had also partaken in some pagan education, answered and said to them: "You all have spoken in vain, introducing useless things into our midst. So if you listen to me, let us speak to the king and the bishop Gregentios that he shall give us people that want to discuss with us, so that, if they convince us with good reasons, we will at once become Christians according to experience, and if they will not convince us, they will understand as well that they have now forced us by tyranny to fall away from our faith, and perhaps then something will happen. For the time being let us try them, and let us know ourselves what their faith is, and if it is true, let us believe. For do we know whether the Messiah has come often and we did not recognise him? And if it is false, we will understand now that we die for God's sake, and embrace death with readiness."

When he had said this, they all were terrified and said to Herban: "As we see, even you defend the Christians yourself. Do you know not that our faith is true? And how shall we abandon it?" Herban said: "My brothers, I have not said anything bad, for you see that they will force us to be baptised in the one or the other case. Now if you do not listen to me, I am innocent

of every single one of you. For at all events, if you do not investigate their faith and believe without trial, you will have done as they have ordered; if you do not believe, you know that they will kill us and we will die."

So they discussed whether they should give ear to Herban, and they drew up their words together on a tablet and gave it to the king. When the king opened and read the tablet which had been given to him, he became furious with them and wanted to kill them. However, he refrained a little, called for the archbishop and gave him the tablet to read. When the blessed one read it, he realised that it was very good, and said to the king: "The Jews speak well that it is better to believe by conviction than by force. So let them discuss now as they desire, and if we convince them and they still do not accept baptising, then do with them as your majesty in God will order."

When the king heard this, he gave them a time of up to forty days, so that they might consider well whom they wanted to choose for the discussion and send them to him. So they went out and searched in all their clans for those that should meet and prepare for the discussion with the king.

When the fixed preparation time had ended, the most blessed Gregentios gave this counsel to the righteous and most pious king, as he was caring for the public and obeyed his commandments piously: "Give order", he said, "o master, that a ruler shall be given to every district according to your worthy choice, first in this residential city of the Homerites, and then also in all the other towns which are under your reign, through the grand men that live in them. And when this will has happened, then we will explain to them in writing what they have to care of."

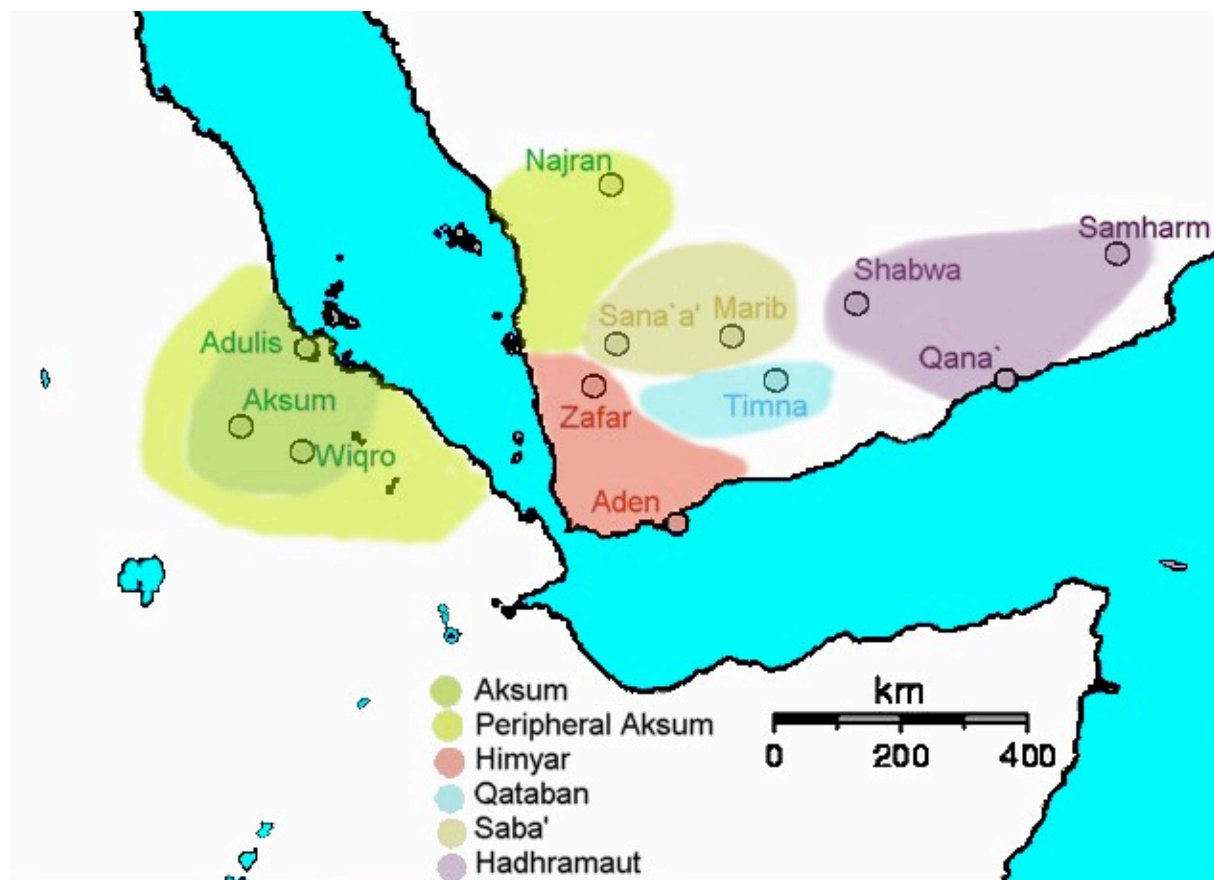
Now the king immediately first divided the ruling city of Negra into thirty-six districts, and straightaway appointed for every district the so-called geitoniarchai, thirty-six in number. And he gave order that every single one of them should have his own office in the neighbourhood allotted to him in the middle of the main street, commanding that all houses should be registered, with who was in charge of them, so that they should know until where every single one of them had his authority, and should not roam around into the neighbourhood of another, looking about and giving commands there. And when this had happened, he assigned a troop of sixteen guardsmen each to every district and stationed it there for their service. And when these things had been arranged, the king ordered them to accept payments and munificences and annual donations, and to do well with reverence and fear of God; and he ordered the most blessed Gregentios to make out a written command and to give it to them, so that they might know exactly what they had to take care of. And the blessed one sat down immediately and began to compose in tranquillity what had been ordered to him.

The most pious king swiftly built homes for old people, hospitals, poorhouses and hostels, bestowing many goods upon them. The incomes of those great estates, which the king of the

Hebrews Dounaas and his grand men had brought together, he directed to them on their account, and cured and brought to rest there magnificently, the poor and those in need, the old and the weak, the lame and the blind, giving them payments all year by year, garments, grain and wine, oil and fruit and all kinds of goods, so that the praise was according to the name: For they called the patriarch a second Abraham and the king a second Job because of his hospitality and his immense beneficence. For celebrating the memories of the saints he ordered to two tables to be set up, one for the poor and the other one for his grand men. At the hour of a meal he always ate reclining with the poor, and always gave munificent gifts to both of them.

Every time a man came asking him for something of good, he obeyed and gave him readily what he had demanded, so that in the times of his reign there were no poor at all where he was king, nor one who committed or suffered injustice according to the Scripture. And God silenced every nation around him as well, and no war arose in his days, but there was deep peace, joy and gladness, care for the poor and protection of the widows and orphans, an exceedingly good state of inexpressible righteousness, spiritual feasts and churches.

**Source:** Albrecht Berger [Ed.], *Life and Works of Saint Gregentios, Archbishop of Taphar Introduction, Critical Edition and Translation*, Walter de Gruyter, 2006, pp. 383-411.



*Map of Aksum and Arabia Felix (South Arabia), 3rd century AD. The Himyarite Kingdom is in red.*



*Icon of Sts. Boniface and Aglais, along with St. Gregentios (Gregory) Bishop of Omirits Ethiopia - Commemorated on December 19*



*The only depiction of Gregentios from the Byzantine period: a 12th-century fresco in a Cypriot church*